U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge

The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad

From the 17th century to the Civil War, the Great Dismal Swamp and canal has been identified as a refuge and a route to freedom for thousands of runaway enslaved African Americans. For some, the swamp offered a means to purchase their freedom, through canal and timber production. Others chose to use the swamp as a hiding place. Despite the method or conditions, the swamp provided the means of freedom which so many sought.

The Dreadful Swamp

In 1728, William Byrd II was tasked with determining the line between North Carolina and Virginia. The work was relatively easy until the crew encountered the Great Dismal Swamp. Although the men eagerly tackled the task, the swamp proved to be nearly impossible to traverse. In Byrd's journal, written in 1728, he described the swamp, and his work to survey the line through it, with the following passage:

This dreadful swamp was ever judgd impassable, 'til the line divideing Virginia from North Carolina was carryd through it in the year 1728, by the order of his late majesty. Nor would it have been practicable then, but by the benefit of an exceeding dry season, as well as the invincible vigor and industry of those that undertook it. Some of the neighbors have lost themselves here for some days, but never had either the courage or curiosity to advance very far.

While Byrd came away with the distinct impression that the swamp was bleak, he believed that the land could be reclaimed and suggested forming a company of British and American investors and using enslaved labor to drain portions of the swamp for agriculture. His suggestion was acted on nineteen years later, when several prominent Virginia land speculators, including George Washington, Anthony Bacon and John Robinson, organized the Dismal Swamp Land Company.

Long before the Land Company was organized, local settlers had been supplying the region with shingles, staves, planking, and naval stores made from the cypress and Atlantic white ceder harvested in Dismal Swamp. Bondsmen were often sent to cut shingles in the swamp. They were expected to provide the owner with a specified amount. Anything beyond that amount, the bondsman could keep and sell on his own.

By 1757, the company had started building canals to Lake Drummond, such as the Washington and Jericho Ditches, using enslaved labor. However, a general economic downturn, internal problems, and the Revolution brought an end to the efforts of the Land Company.

Dismal Swamp Canal

The 22-mile Dismal Swamp Canal, connecting the Chesapeake Bay, to the Albermarle Sound, continues to serve boaters today. Built predominantly by enslaved labor, the canal was a major highway between the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina in the early 19th century, serving merchants, farmers, and timber interests in both states.

Willis Hodges, a free African American, worked on the Canal between 1835-36. He saw first hand the harsh treatment the laborers received. After an unnecessary beating of one of the enslaved workers, he considered inciting a revolt against the overseer. He determined that this was an impossible task since the laborers had no weapons. He resigned himself to leave South Mills, NC and eventually moved his family to New York.

Moses Grandy was an enslaved waterman, working on the Dismal Swamp Canal as a ferry man and canal boatman. In his narrative, he remembered, "Negroes are up to the middle or much in the mud and water, cutting away roots and baling out mud. If they can keep their heads above the water, they work on." After earning enough money to pay for his freedom twice, Grandy finally purchased his freedom and moved north.

Swamp as Refuge

Many slaves found the swamp to be a safe hiding place, providing a "freedom" which was desparately sought.

How many people found refuge in the Dismal Swamp? No one knows, however, historians consider it one of the largest maroon colonies, or, hidden communities of escaped slaves, in the United States.

In 1784, John Ferdinand Smyth, in his book A Tour of the United States of America, wrote the following about the swamp:

Run-away Negroes have resided in these places for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves in the swamp upon corn, hogs, and fowls, that they raised on some of the spots not perpetually under water, nor subject

to be flooded, as forty-nine parts out of fifty of it are; and on such spots they have erected habitations, and cleared small fields around them; yet these have always been perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around, even to those nearest to and best acquainted with the swamps.

Osman. Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection. Crayon, Porte (David Strother), The Dismal Swamp. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, vol. 13, issue 76. (September 1856).

As late as 1853, information about the existence of these communities was still prevalent. During a Southern tour in 1853, Frederick Law Olmsted described a conversation he had with the bondsman, Joseph Church:

The Dismal Swamps are noted places of refuge for runaway negroes. They were formerly peopled in this way much more than at present; a systematic hunting of them with dogs and guns having been made by individuals who took it up as a business about ten years ago. Children were born, bred, lived, and died here. Joseph Church told me he had seen skeletons, and had helped to bury bodies recently dead. There were people in the swamps still, he thought, that were the children of runaways, and who had been runaways themselves "all their lives."

In 1856, during a stop at Horse Camp in the Great Dismal Swamp, the author and illustrator Porte Crayon [David Hunter Strother] came upon a runaway slave with a gun. Crayon hid, and ran as soon as the runaway slave left. Crayon made a quick sketch of the person he encountered and showed the drawing to others at Horse Camp. One of the men referred to the drawing as 'Osman', but no one wanted to talk about who he was.

Gangs of maroons contributed to the fear many people had about travel around the swamp. By 1847, problems with runaways in the Great Dismal Swamp apparently had reached such proportions that the North Carolina State Assembly passed the ***Act to provide for the apprehension of runaway slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp and for other purposes***. The act required all slaves working in the swamp to be registered, including a detailed description of their appearance.

The ports of Virginia and North Carolina, particularly Portsmouth, Norfolk and Elizabeth City, were major access points for runaway slaves looking for passage on a ship headed north. Many would use the swamp as a stopping point on their way to one of the region's port cities, until passage onboard ship could be secured.

Civil War Liberation

Brigadier General Edward Augustus Wild, a native of Massachusetts, was an ardent abolitionist. In November of 1863, the War Department assigned Wild's African Brigade (as it was then designated) to Norfolk and Portsmouth. Both cities were a part of the department commanded by Major General Benjamin F. Butler, also zealous opponent of slavery. On December 5, 1863, Butler issued an order implementing the administration's policy to aggressively recruit former slaves.

With Butler's permission, Gen. Wild began planning an expedition into northeastern North Carolina. An account of the expedition included the following:

The teams of their masters were impressed, and they were taken along with their household property. In this way the train was hourly extended, until by night it was a half mile in length. The inhabitants being almost exclusively "secesh," [secessionist] the colored boys were allowed to forage at will along the road.

By Christmas Eve, General Wild's expedition was complete. However, complaints and protests from the local citizens poured in over the hundreds of wagon loads of confiscated goods, some taken not only from Southern sympathizers but loyal Union families as well. As a result, General Butler published an order specifying circumstances when private property might be taken. In it, he stated:

While the theory adopted by some officers that all the property in the rebel States belongs to the negroes, because it is the product of their labor, is theoretically true, yet it is not such a truth as can be made the foundation of Government action. Therefore, negroes… are not to be allowed to bring with them any other than those personal effects which have belonged to them, or such property as the officer commanding may order.

After the war, it is believed the maroons left the swamp and assimilated into the free African American community.

Today, archeologists continue to search for remnants of the swamp's maroon communities and encounter the same impenetrable nature that kept those communities hidden. To learn more about the history of the Great Dismal Swamp, check out these resources.

Royster, Charles. The Fabulous History of the Great Dismal Swamp Land Company.

Cecelski, David S. The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina.

Gatewood, Willard B. Freeman of Color: The Autobiography of Willis Augustus Hodges.

Moses Grandy Narrative. http://docsouth.unc.edu/grandy/menu.html.

Leaming, Hugo Prosper. Hidden Americans: Maroons of Virginia and the Carolinas. (Garland Publishing, Inc. New York & London, 1995), 324-494.